# Fairbury's Underground Businesses

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Early Fairbury had many small one-person type businesses. These included barbers, tailors, shoe repairers, lunchrooms, and bathhouses. These small businesses did not require much floor space, and they could not justify a large building. A perfect option for these small businesses was to rent space in the basement of the conventional business buildings.

The business buildings on Locust Street used coal to heat them until the 1950s. These businesses needed an easy way to get coal delivered to the basement where the boilers were located. One solution was to build a coal bin under the sidewalk in front of the building. A removable manhole was placed in the concrete of the sidewalk. A horse-drawn coal wagon could drive up next to the manhole, and coal could be delivered down the manhole into the basement coal bin.

Many buildings were planned to have both basement businesses and coal bins. The entrance to the basement business was an opening in the sidewalk with a stairway going to the basement. Some of the basement businesses had plate-glass storefront windows similar to the upper-level businesses. The coal bin was walled off from the basement business entrance to keep the dirty coal dust away from patrons. The December 1894 Blade published an article describing the new Odd Fellows Temple that was going to be built. The article said the basement would be fitted up for barbershops and other businesses.

The Sanborn Insurance Company published a series of maps of Fairbury between the years of 1885 and 1911. These maps show most of the businesses on the north side of Locust Street had basements under the sidewalks in front of the buildings.

Many of these small basement businesses advertised in the Third Street Opera House program booklets. One of these was the Star Lunch Room, under G. Y. McDowell's Bank, with Harry Olmstead as the Proprietor. Another basement business was Ellis's Barber Shop with three barbers and bathrooms under the Fairbury Bank. A third Opera House program advertisement was for the Fairbury Suititorium. The ad noted that Joe Myers did not shine or ruin your goods in pressing, and clothes were called for and delivered under the office of Dr. Lewis.

Early barbershops offered a unique bath service. For a small fee, a traveler, farmhand, or others lacking access to a refreshing tub could soak and scrub in solitary splendor.

A series of at least three barbershops were located in the basement of Walton's. These included C. W. Keck, Frank Wharton, and Jay Tyler. A 1921 Blade article recounted that two men were leaning against the railing leading down to Tyler's underground

barbershop. Suddenly, the railing gave way, and the two men went tumbling halfway down the stairs leading to the basement barbershop.

Frank Joda operated his tailor shop for eleven years under the Fairbury Shoe Store. He chose to keep his business underground and relocated to space under the Fairbury Bank. Joda was in the tailoring business for more than fifty years. The last tailoring work he performed was just ten days before his death at age seventy-four in 1940. Photographs still exist of Frank in his underground tailor business.

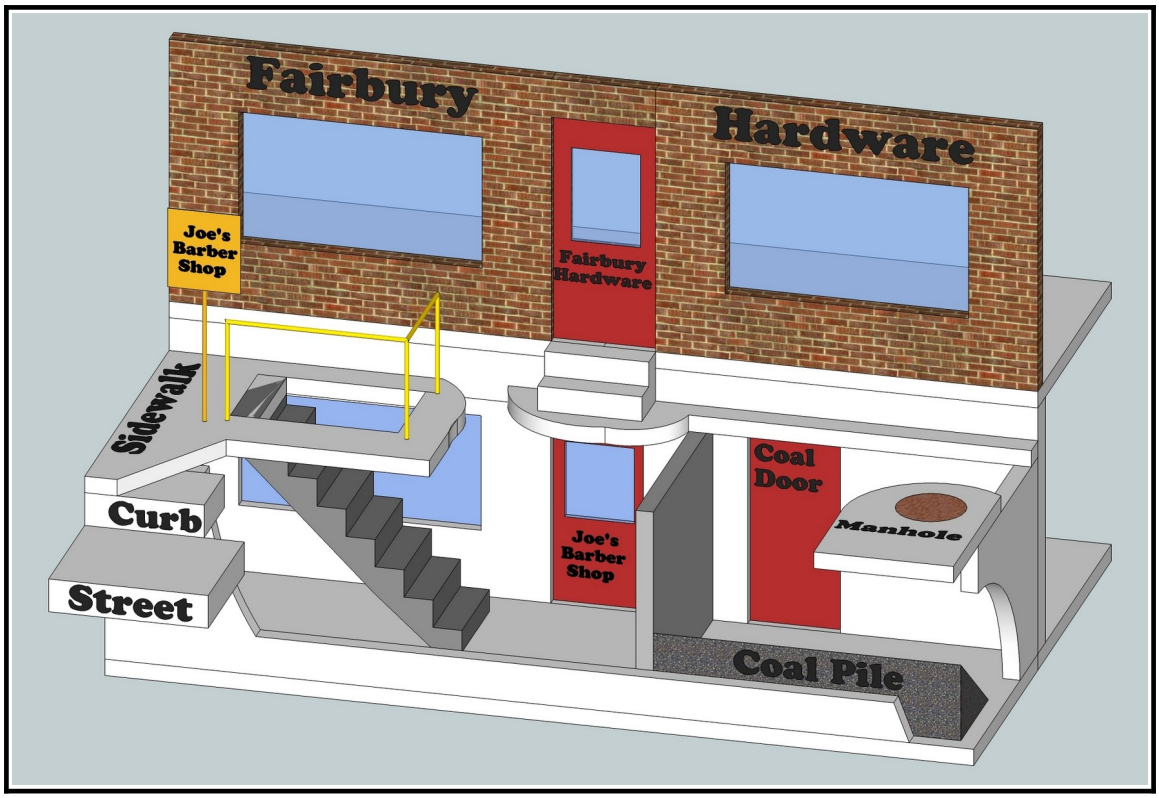
The last of the basement businesses closed in 1963 when Henry Troehler retired from his barbershop that operated under what was then Mary Gunn's Fashion Shop. This location was the second building east of Third Street. Henry went to live in the Illinois Odd Fellows Home where he died several months later. When he left, the last of the basement entrances were boarded over, and the underground Fairbury faded from view and memory.

Coal heating was replaced with natural gas boilers or furnaces starting in the 1950s. The coal bins were no longer needed. Many businesses, such as Bob Nussbaum Plumbing, used the coal bins for storage areas.

The Fairbury area has a relatively high water table, and deep basements often are flooded with water. To minimize flooded basements, the buildings on the north side of Locust Street were designed with the basements as shallow as possible. The shallow basements resulted in relatively high curbs on Locust Street. These high curbs were not a problem for horses, but automobiles often hit the curbs and started to break the sidewalks.

To solve the high curb problem, the decision was made in 1970 to fill all of the chambers under the sidewalks with sand and make a two-step lower street curb design. This work was completed in 1971.

One of the remnants of Fairbury's underground businesses is many old photographs. Some of these show the street level railings for the stairs leading to the basement businesses. Other old photos show what these small businesses looked like. Advertisements for these underground businesses are shown in some of the Third Street Opera House programs. Many of these items documenting Fairbury's interesting subterranean businesses can be viewed at the Fairbury Echoes Museum.


Fairbury
Hardware
Joe's Barber Shop
Fairbury Hardware
Sidewalk
Curb
Street
Joe's Barber Shop
Coal Door
Manhole
Coal Pile